

Oral History of Louise Johnston

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Western Sonoma County Historical society

Evelyn McClure with Stacy Rupert and Tiffany Reise of Sonoma State.

Besides talking about the Library history I'd like to talk to you about your family because your family has been here for a long time in Sebastopol. Can you tell me how they got established here?

Yes, my father Arthur Swain was born in Napa, and his father was a lawyer who practiced in Santa Rosa. And my mother was in San Francisco with her French parents from Bordeaux, France. Mother and father met in an insurance office in San Francisco, fell in love and eventually settled here in 1904 in Sebastopol. They lived in various places, in 1906 when the earthquake hit they were on Main Street. Mother had taken her baby, my older brother Stanley, on a shopping trip to San Francisco. In those days they had to stay the night because they had to take the train, then the ferry, it was a long trip. Stanley was just learning to walk, so mother took a teenage girl with her, did the shopping and the girl became homesick, so mother sent her back home. Mother and the baby went on to the hotel, which was owned by Francis, the family. And at 2:20 in the morning the earthquake hit. Father woke up here, on Main Street, and saw the dresser coming toward him, and so he realized it was an earthquake and he hopped up and put on his pants and shirt and dashed up town to see if there was anything he could do to help.

There was one hotel and father asked the proprietor if there was anything he could do and he said yes. We have one customer upstairs in bed and they dashed upstairs and the brick wall had fallen onto the bed. So father and the proprietor started hauling the bricks off and when they got down to the man and he had seen the wall coming. He had seen the wall coming, so he grabbed the edge of the sheet and made an air pocket with his elbows. In Sebastopol, as far as I know, there were no real casualties.

Father's first thoughts were of his baby and wife in San Francisco. Somehow he heard that it was terrible in San Francisco. So he got onto a train but it took forever because of the damage to the tracks. He finally made it to Sausalito and got the ferry across and made his way to the hotel where they were to stay and it was just a burnt out hope. So he hunted for three days for mother. In the meantime, mother stood in line, a soup and bread line in Golden Gate Park. She sat Stanley down; he was all brown and black from the fires. She eventually made it out in to the part of the city that hadn't been burned, because they had friends there.

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Father watched the Call building burn, and after about three days of wondering, looking at food lines he made his way out the this family that they knew and they got together and I think he said they paid \$25 (which was a lot in those days) to hire a horse and buggy to take them down to the fairy and home. Mother grabbed the baby and got dressed and rushed out into the streets. And everything had been turned out into the streets that you don't usually see. She said there were men in their night shirts and top hats carrying bird cages or dragging trucks as it were, open end and the things inside were strung all over the streets. One man stopped her and said where are you going with that baby? She said I'm going to the fairy and get out of here as fast as I can. It's no use lady because they have used all the water out of the bay to put this fire out. So they finally got together.

Then father went into the banking business with his brother in-law.

EM Who was his brother in-law?

Frank Brush. Frank was married to father's sister. Father eventually became president of the bank, at that time it was called the Analy Savings Bank – Sebastopol National Bank. Then it became the Bank of Sonoma County and then it was something else until it became West America.

They lived on Calder for a while, and then until they built this house in 1915 or 16 they lived down here on Maple for awhile. They had a daughter who was five years younger than Stanley and twelve years later they had my twin brother and me. This house had been built when we were born. We have pictures of it under construction. They said this hill was mostly berries and we believe it when we are gardening with all the berry bushes. They had to bring in a lot of topsoil because there was a lot of clay. They terraced the whole property. They had a family orchard on the corner of Maple and Vine. Then they built a gardeners house on High Street and had a clay tennis court down there. In my time it was a basketball court, I never played tennis.

Father passed on in 1938 and mother rented the gardener house and eventually sold it. She had a landscape gardener do something with the family orchard. He divided it into three pie shaped lots and my twin brother took one, I took one and my sister another. So those three houses were down there.

Then I graduated the elementary school, the last year before they built the new one. Which is still there. I went to Analy, the first class of the new Analy High School. Graduated in 1940. Went to Junior college, my twin brother went into the bank. The war hit. The President of our senior class was Peter Masaroca, who was killed in Italy while fighting for the United States, Japanese, wonderful man. There were quite a few of my classmate who were killed in the war.

My twin went in the Navy as a radioman. I took his job at the bank for a year. Then I joined the waves and was sent back to the University of Indiana for bookkeeping training, I became a storekeeper. After four months of training there and because I was diligent and had good grades I had a choice. The Navy actually gave me my choice which was 12th Mayo(?) district, San Francisco. So I got to take the train back, mother was widowed and I felt guilty going off and leaving her. But the dean of Analay was a dear friend of the family, so she moved in here and lived here for 21 years, Laura Lorraine. A wonderful lady.

My assignment was Navy Nurse(?) Station Alameda. I had a wonderful job. Never had to do kitchen duty or clean the bathroom, although I lived in the barracks with 50 people.

I did research for aircraft. Had 12 navy airbases, the squadrons would come into alameda to go out into the war zone into the Pacific. Spare parts were never available so I spent a lot of time in the research department trying to find other parts that would work. And sometime would have to fly to Sacramento and McLennan Airbase or go to the Naval Supply Depot across the estuary in Oakland. It could be a tiny screw or a wing, it was exciting. One day my boss in the office, it was called the AOG, Aircraft On Ground department. He said would you like to meet this officer who was just passing through, who was Don Johnston. So we met and my boss was Henry Treoni and my best friend was Madeline Treoni and other couple and we did the City. Don was from Pennsylvania was an officer, 90 wonder, came out to Burmington, WA and was assigned to the Ommaney Bay, which was an aircraft carrier. He was sent by my former boss from Alameda, who was the supply officer on the ship and Don boss. Don sent ahead by train to get supplies ready on the ship. My new boss introduced us. Then the next night Don and I went out on a date then the next day they sailed for Australia. They were gone about... Into San Diego, he asked me to meet him down there. I told him that I had a brother in LA and I'd meet him there. And after 5 days of wonderful family fun he proposed and I accepted and we got on a train and came up. He met mother and my friends here. Then he said and was gone ten months. I received a wire from the dispersing office of the ship that the ship had been sunk by a kamikaze. He was Don's roommate. He and Don had survived. So I had not met Don parents back east and they qere quite elderly. So I wired them. Don was in the mess hall, the ship shuddered and dust and debris came down from the ceiling. They thought one of their own planes had crash-landed on the flight deck. So he and Dean were separated and Don made his way out through a bulge in the ship. They were always told that the senior officer present would be the last one off. There was no communication because everything was knocked out and on fire. They were also told to never go head first, go feet first. He didn't have his live belt on, and he had no choice. The main officer in this little group was the first to go, he went head first, so Don jumped off. They were kicking around and trying to get away from the ship because they didn't want to get sucked in when it finally sank. He was put aboard a small ship and then some of the survivors of the Ommaney

Bay was transferred onto the battle ship New Mexico then went on and bombarded Manila. A kamikaze hit his battleship direct on the bridge, of course the battleship did not sink, but there were about 10 men standing on the bridge. Horrible things happened to some and some survived.

I was ill in sickbay in Alameda, opened my eyes and saw the tall handsome blonde officer at was Dean Miller, who I have never met and Don's roommate.

There were 450 survivors coming in on the Alcoa Polaris, aluminum of America ship, so mother prepared a big feast here. In the meantime Dean's wife and baby had come up from San Diego and we drove over to the pier in San Francisco to pick up Don and come back here. Four ships including the Alcoa Polaris were fog bound outside the gate and couldn't come in. So we drove up here and ate mother's feast and she asked so what time in the morning are you going back to get Don. So I went down alone. I didn't tell him that Dean was here. I went out onto the pier and there were Red Cross and Army band and myself. It finally sidled into the dock and they put the gangplanks down and Don said he was on another deck and they said Lt. Johnston your wife is down there. He said, we're not married. That's ok, I hadn't seen him in 10 months. None of my letter had caught up to him. He didn't know that I was going to be there.

They took all the stretcher cases off first and then knowing I was down there he was the first able-bodied man off. And everybody included hooted, hollered 100's off service men. He dropped his duffle bag and embraced me and we had to go to the Civic Center where he had to sign papers then we drove up here. Drove into the driveway and Dean came out with his baby and it was a very touching reunion.

Then Don looked for work, he graduated from Penn State in Business and he looked into the area and low and behold, through a family friend, he found a job here and then he became a New York Life Insurance Agent.

We rented a house for years out of town, had a wall bed, a tiny tiny place. We were expecting our first son, so we went out to Zempher's tract and rented a house there for four years. It was before the tract. We were on the Zempher's pig farm. All the walls were dark knotty pine. So when we raised the rent \$45 dollars we said this is ridiculous, we're going to build our own house. So we built the modern house next door, 43 Vine Avenue. We lived there 9 years. Mother passed on in 1961. Laura Lorraine rented our house and I inherited the home because my twin – after the war he worked in the bank and got tired of people, waiting to get promoted. He quit and went into the well drilling business. My sister had long since moved away and my older brother too. My older brother was an artist and my sister was a musician in southern California. So, I was it. We've lived here since 1961.

EM: How did you get involved with the library? Did your father tell you much about building the Carnegie Library?

LJ: No, you see we were only 16 when he passed on. I had no idea that he was secretary of the Sebastopol Library until this man who came to do some research on the Apple Industry came across this article. It was about the application to get a Carnegie Grant to build the Carnegie Library. The grant was written up and submitted by the secretary, A.B. Swain. Which shocked me, well I taught school for 26 years, Penngrove and Sebastopol and I had been appointed to the Library advisory board. We were concerned about the Carnegie Library because it was two stories and they only had one librarian and she couldn't supervise the children's department downstairs and the upstairs. So the advisory board, which I was on, recommended that it be knocked down. It had to do with the Magnolia tree, it couldn't be taken down. And it's still up. The architect worked it out. Then we worried, maybe the Carnegie Library was sturdy but the bulldozer nudged it and it collapsed. We were really relieved. Because the whole point was it wasn't earthquake safe. So the new library was built and of course it's now 25 years old and inadequate by far. They expected Forestville to grow more than it has and a library would be there. So the Sebastopol Library has to service on beyond to Forestville out to the ocean. I think that they said it was like a 50,000 population. It's just faulting at the seams. So the library needs to move. Where would they move and where would the money come from was a big problem? The friends of the library, we have \$30,150 so far – called the building fund, mainly to maybe hire an architect. In the mean time we are going to band-aid repairs to ease some of the problems. So that the reference librarian can see the children's librarian, they can't now. And the circulation desk is very inefficient and Mr. Sadsay, who was a director of the Sonoma County Library for 30 years I believe, is one of the finest library planners. That's arranging the floor plan in the nation. He had retired from directorship of the County Library. He lives on Ferguson road. He has, pro-bono, come up with this very wonderful plan to ease things. And the next step is to have an architect look at their plans and give an estimate on costs. And that is right up to date.

After I don't know how many years after the advisory board, David Cassidy(?) appointed me to the Library Commission of the Sonoma County Library and I was on that 12 years. And I retired a few years ago.

I retired from teaching and Marge McDonald called me and said we need your help with Friends of the Library, which financially supports the library. She said the Friends is just collapsing. So I joined the Friends of the Library and they immediately elected me president, twenty-two years ago. No one else will take it over, but I enjoy it.

EM: How old is the Friends of the Library?

LJ: It was founded in 1969. They had their first book sales under the magnolia tree and made \$100. Lois Zarloff and Esther Foster were right in it in the very beginning. It gradually grew, now we have about 385 members and last year we made about \$40,000 for the library. The paperback table there brings in about \$400 per month, everything on there is \$.50.

EM: How much influence does the Friends have because county wide system is a governmental until and they run the

LJ: The County has eleven libraries and each one has an advisory board. They can just advise but the whole purpose is to get feed back on the local patrons, what they want, what their needs are. And feed it back to the commission, they're the ones who decide what's to be done. The Advisory Board has no way of making money, so the Friends is the ones who deals with membership, the paperback table, our five books sales a year which bring in an amazing amount. First we were excited it was \$3,000, then it was \$5,000. They are a lot of work, I get about 30 volunteers and it's fun. It's a good community spirit. Daily, there are about five of us who take turns, sorting all the donations that come in. There are an amazing amount of readers out there and they donate some really wonderful books, some are horrible and we just throw them out. We sort them into categories every day, then we set up for the sale we set up a virtual bookstore in two days and we run for about three days. Many people enjoy helping the Library.

OTHERS: We did a historical background of the Library of the new building, we noticed that between the old library and the new library there was only an allowance of 10,000 more books. How come when they decided to build the new library they didn't decide to move the location of library? How come they decided to build it in the same exact location?

LJ: Probably because it's a great location, so central. We hate to move away if the time ever comes. And I guess they owned the property and it would be costly a new property. Not to make the building bigger, then they had a low building plans, no two story plans back then. The architect was very artistic and they had that lovely carpeted mural in the children's library. And at the time it was adequate because they thought there would be a library in Forestville and maybe out at Bodega.

EM: There's nothing in Forestville?

LJ: We have two outline stations. The county rents two locations, one in Occidental and one in El Molino. El Molino was building at the time and they offered to have a space there for the Forestville outlet library. Much ado about that, they would have a new building, new restrooms which they didn't have before in this awful little rental place in Forestville. It's not right in town, you have

to go out to the high school. But many advantages. Those are the outline stations.

Mr. Sadsay wishes we could locate the library down where the performing arts center, the Rio Lumber Yard. There are possible grants that the state is offering that the board is looking into, but it's pretty hopeless. They are going to do a one-year study, which is costly. We are going to donate \$2,000 towards the study. Santa Rosa Friends are donating \$18,000 and it's very complicated. You can't get a grant unless this study is done of the regional library and what they need and what the costs would be. Then they set up the priority and would get what first. So it would be years from now. So we'll do the band-aid in the mean time.

OTHERS: My question was about the magnolia tree. Why did the people want the tree there? We never ran across any reason for the protesting of cutting it down.

LJ: Did you run across anything on that?

OTHERS: Yeah, I thought they did end up cutting it down though.

EM: I thought that there was an Oak tree that they wanted to cut down and there was protest to that. They did plant a Magnolia tree when they built Carnegie.

LJ: Well, it's just like we received a note the other day from a lady on High Street, Ellen Jordon. She said they wanted to build a granny unit for her dad and it would not – the roofline would not be above her house, she didn't say which house she was. We are below and north of you. The trees would be cut down would give us a better view of Mt. St. Helena. Well we don't want those trees cut down. They are egrets that come up every night and roost there. I can see why people would want a beautiful tree left.

EM: You do a lot of side programs at the Library. Is that the main focus of your travel, looking for birds?

LJ: Originally it was not. We've gone on four special expeditions, which included birding but it was natural history. We did Australia and Indonesia and India. On our birding and nature tours, it's strictly birding although we also took interest in all nature. If there were salamanders, etc.

Then we got into Birds and Music, I'm a music lover. There is Sunbirds out of England, they run Birds and Music trips, we've been on all four trips.

EM: How do they combine Birds and Music?

LJ: In Australia we did birding in the morning before breakfast and after breakfast, then later we would go to concerts in the hall or in a near by cathedral. Don for the first time enjoyed classical music and he was hooked.

I've been wondering about the centennial and the library would be 25 years old. We would want to do something for the community for the 25th anniversary and it seems it would combine well with the centennial. We thought we could have pictures of the early pictures of Sebastopol. The photos would be at the central library at the annex. Friends of the library would be willing to pay for the copies.

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